



Kansas State University Libraries  
**New Prairie Press**

---

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2017 - Chisholm Trail (Larry Patton, editor)

---

## They Say that Heaven is a Free Range

Ton Haak

Antonia Zoutenbier

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

---

### Recommended Citation

Haak, Ton and Zoutenbier, Antonia (2017). "They Say that Heaven is a Free Range," *Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal*. <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh/2017/legacy/5>

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to [shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org](http://shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org).

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact [cads@k-state.edu](mailto:cads@k-state.edu).



THE GRASSES  
*Richard Kooyman*

## THEY SAY THAT HEAVEN IS A FREE RANGE

It still feels a little weird, living in this part of the Western hemisphere, where, more than a century after he is commonly said to have disappeared, the cowboy is still very much alive, and the free-ranging beef cattle are kicking too. In this place, life is still based on the outdoors, a few nineteenth-century customs, and the survival of the fittest.

The original cowboy culture, lasting maybe twenty years, had little permanence because it was a frontier institution that died even before the American frontier died. Its golden days were long gone before the dawn of the twentieth century. Yet, my present domicile is living proof that it didn't completely disappear, didn't altogether die.

No, real cowboys didn't die out; they didn't even fade away. In the Flint Hills the cattle ranchers and cowboys and cowgirls are not shaping their lives after the images of the mythical culture of dime novels and Western movies, the culture that as such never existed. Their lives continue to be impacted by the land, the grasses, the streams and springs, the color of the sky and the unpredictability of the weather, and the insularly devoted care they have to give to their beef cattle. In Chase County each summer more than 100,000 head of cattle arrive to graze for the season; in the Flint Hills as a whole—still the virgin prairie—we are talking about two million “beeves.” The land is large enough for them to be mere black dots on the horizon.

The cattle work is essentially the same as it used to be in those early days, be it without the long, hot, dusty, and brutal interstate cattle drives. In the nineteenth century, these drives took many months, as did one chronicled in George Duffield's journal that began on April 5, 1866, near San Sabe, Texas. Four months later:

*August 8th: Came to Big Walnut.  
Cattle stampeded & ran by 2 farms &  
the people was very angry but we made  
it alright. Was visited by many men.  
Was threatened with the law but think  
we are alright now. August 10th:  
Crossed from the Osage Hills into the  
Flint Hills of Kansas. No roads or  
trails of any consequence. Summer was  
wet, and the creeks winding through the  
treeless hills have plenty of water.  
Reached Council Grove on August 20th.  
Union Stockyard in Burlington, Iowa,  
to ship the cattle to Chicago, on  
November 1st. Seven months in the  
saddle. Fewer than half of the longhorns  
we started with made it safely to  
the slaughterhouse.*

The cowboy era, as we all know, ended when barbed wire was developed, settlers began to put up fences around their property, and the railroad had extended its lines and set up cattle loading pens everywhere. It was a sad, sad day, as shown by the lyrics of this old cowboy song:

*They say that Heaven is a free range land  
Good-by, good-by, o fare you well;  
But it's barbed wire fence for the  
Devil's hat band  
And barbed wire blankets down in Hell!*

Today there are no more adventurous and "romantic" drives. Yet the work of those who operate ranches or are hiring out as cowhands has not changed much. In the twenty-first century it's still hard work, even now that cattle trucks unload and load almost in the pasture and many a ranch hand is keeping his (or her) horses more for fun or sentimental reasons than for putting them to work.

It still feels a little unreal to me, newcomer on the prairie, to see my

young neighbor T.W. Burton hitch-up the trailer behind his truck and leave for his pastures, to inspect his cattle, to mend fences, or whatever comes up. He is the son of an old-time rancher, who is the son of an old-time rancher, and he and his wife, Rachele, decided to continue the tradition. Although, there is not much money to be made in the cattle business, their dedication and creativity builds a solid ranching business.

It feels a little weird to see, on days when the work is not too hectic, the trucks drive up to the Hitchin' Post at lunchtime with saddled horses in the trailers. The cowboys have their equivalent of a business lunch before they continue their chores. Some of them are hired by big landowners to look after 5,000 head of cattle spread out over different pastures, each measuring about a thousand acres or more. They drive their trucks out, release their horses, mount up, and ride off to inspect the herd. They are

conscientious workers, knowing that they are paid by the weight gain of the cattle under their supervision. A three-pound gain a day is not exceptional in the summer in the Flint Hills. Yet losing a calf or a heifer weighing a few hundred pounds instantly and seriously affects their income.

Cowboy hats with high crowns and wide brims are still abundant and not influenced by any fashion (other than being kept on indoors); they are sensible work gear just as the slant-heeled boots are, as are the ropes to throw "overhanded head catches" or "heeling catches." Neither are raised-button spurs a luxury when on horseback. In the trucks they carry spare tires (for the rocky prairie soil commits murder on truck tires), salt blocks, posthole diggers, heavy rolls of barbed wire, and a wide variety of tools. They tackle each and every problem they meet themselves, in any kind of weather, for help is not only far away but costly. Most of them (including the





ROUND UP SERIES  
Dave Leiker

women) are proud of their profession of the grasslands they own or manage, and they are in love with the hardships of the outdoors. They are in love with their own culture. For me, the observer, it is a feast to see them ride out far on the horizon, even the ones who nowadays take it easier and drive a four-

wheel-drive Kawasaki “mule” instead of riding a four-footed horse.

We all know hundreds of stories about the cowboy days, about the Wild West of the late nineteenth century. There are also tall tales to tell of today’s cowboys.

Jim Hoy, with roots in the Flint Hills “as deep as those of bluestem grass in

black-soil bottomland,” put many an oral history in writing: “I feed on the stories of the Hills and the characters who tell them as the cattle feed on the grasses.” He owns a ranch southwest of Matfield Green, is a professor of English literature, and is the director of the Center for Great Plains Studies, at Emporia State University. He and his wife, Cathy, cherish the old way of doing things, and that’s on horseback. Their son Josh worked as a cowboy-for-hire until he started his own cattle operation on the beautiful Flying W Ranch with his wife Gwen and daughter Josie. They welcome guests to their bunkhouse and allow them to join in on cattle-working days. Jim Hoy’s book *Flint Hills Cowboys* is a treasure, a must

for anyone interested in the ways of the real cowboy of today and the not so distant past.

Another good read is *Addie of the Flint Hills: A Prairie Child During the Depression* by Adaline Sorace as told to her daughter Deborah. A few months ago, Adaline, now ninety-four years old and living in New York City, came to Pioneer Bluffs to autograph her book of vivid memories of the hardscrabble life so typical for rural Americans of her generation. She is a granddaughter of the Roglers and the Beedles who settled early in Chase County—those Roglers who started the ranch at Pioneer Bluffs, those Beedles from whom our buddy Jane Koger is descended.

If one thing stands out in both books



WIRE (2)  
Don Wolfe



and similar reads, it is the large number of ranchers and cowboys and the women who reach a very old age and keep going, keep on trucking. I don't think I have ever seen a community with such a substantial and unchanging number of healthy octogenarians, not to mention the men and women like Adaline Sorace or Evan Koger, who with scores of others are in their nineties and often, like Charlie and Betty Swift, still work a hard day's life and enjoy a lusty conversation. Betty was sick recently for the first time in her life. She couldn't eat; eating hurt her, and nothing tasted good anymore. Everything was checked at the hospital, twice, three times, but nothing could be found. "The doctors they didn't believe me when I told 'em it was somethin' my dentist had done. It started right after she'd capped me a tooth." Betty was miserable for weeks and losing weight dangerously quick until, after the fourth test, the doctors had to admit Betty was right. Now, Betty at ninety-two is

working in the fields again as if nothing happened. "I tol' them so," she says.

These prairie grasses must be good for two-legged beings too. No wonder the cowboys from yesteryear used to sing:

*Come all you jolly cowmen, don't you  
want to go  
Way up on the Kansas line?  
Where you whoop up the cattle from  
morning till night  
All out in the midnight rain.*

Which rhymes perfectly if you pronounce rain roughly as rine, as of course all Flint Hills cowboys do.

---

*Dutch natives Ton Haak and his wife, Antonia Zoutenbier, lived in Matfield Green for a number of years and operated the art gallery at Pioneer Bluffs before moving to Portugal in July 2016. Ton's blog entry excerpted above was written in December 2010.*



MEMORY OF A WILD PRAIRIE 2  
Kelly Yarbrough





OCTOBER STORMS, LAST LIGHT  
*Dave Leiker*

FOLLOWING SPREAD:  
PASSING IN THE NIGHT (DETAIL)  
*Kelly Yarbrough*



